

Fairness and Trust—Critical Factors for Collaboration

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As a child, you developed a keen sense of when you were treated fairly. You knew when you were mistreated (“Hey, that’s not fair!”). And you knew when you received some special advantage (“Ooh, goody-goody!”). “We are all simply grown-up, more civilized versions of the children we were decades ago.”

You engage with a partner because you trust his or her competence and motive, and you expect your colleague to follow through on any promises made. If not, “the frustration and inefficiency of not being able to count on someone is more hassle than the burden of handling the full load alone.” Low trust means no partnership.

Those quotes epitomize for me the chapters on “fairness” and “trust” in *The Power of 2: How to Make the Most of Your Partnerships at Work and in Life*. Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller are the authors of this book that I’ve been highlighting in my articles the past two weeks.

Their research determined that there are eight characteristic elements of individuals who successfully work collaboratively. Two weeks ago, I gave an overview of all eight. Last week I shared more information about complementary strengths and a shared mission. Next week, I’ll cover unselfishness and communicating; the following week, I’ll cover acceptance and forgiveness.

In the Gallup organization’s research, the following statements are those associated with fairness. When answered positively, they predict collaborative behavior (and when answered negatively, they foreshadow failure of the partnership effort):

- We share the workload fairly between us.
- We do not have to keep track of who does what and who gets credit for what.
- We see each other as equals; one is not better than the other.

Although instinctive, “fairness” is hard to define. We all tend to know it when we see it and feel it. It’s more an emotional conclusion than it is a rational one. Fairness has to do with the perceptions of both parties regarding the balance of the work load contributed compared to the benefits gained.

Equality of both effort and reward is the most obvious fair split, but such a perfect balance rarely occurs in practice. Collaboration works when unique inputs are provided by each partner. The differences in contribution may be very hard to measure. One member may bring a rare talent, offer more experience, or contribute excitedly in ways the other partner hates.

It’s not uncommon for successful partners to each feel they contribute more than half the work while at the same time feeling they accrue more than half the benefits. This can’t be actually so, of course, but “the perceptions of the two collaborators don’t have to comply with the laws of mathematics.”

“To be a great partner, you must continuously consider how much of the work your counterpart is shouldering and what he or she is getting for the effort.” The rewards are not only monetary, of course. Are the benefits your partner receives meaningful for him or her? Are you sensitive to the potential that your partner may be feeling used? Addressing these issues requires candid conversations and a willingness, if necessary, to adjust either the work or the rewards.

Let’s now consider the area of trust. These statements provide evidence of strong collaborations:

- We trust each other.
- We can count on each other to do what the other says he or she will do.
- He or she tells others how good I am, and I tell others how good he or she is.

Most of us tend to look out for “number one.” Our human nature is to be selfish. Every reader of this article has likely experienced a serious breach of trust.

The research shows that reciprocation, another aspect of human nature, can be stronger than selfishness. The positive side of reciprocation holds a partnership together. If you expect your relationship to last, trust your partner and repay the trust given to you.

In a working relationship, this takes the form of “showing up for an important meeting on time, quickly returning e-mails and phone calls, giving all your creativity to a project, jumping in rather than having to be asked, not being a burden to your partner, fighting for the success of the project, working hard on physical jobs and smart on mental ones, and hundreds of other acts large and small.”

Fairness and trust are two critical elements of successful partnerships. Those two alone, however, are not sufficient. Next week, I’ll look at unselfishness in greater depth and at the importance of mutual communication.